

## The Momo Challenge: A Lesson in Digital Literacy

BY ALEXANDRIA GOSEN

**T**HE INTERNET HAS BEEN NOTORIOUS for viral challenges, both dangerous and not. There has been planking, harlem shaking, the cinnamon challenge, and the ice bucket challenge; all of these are relatively safe if done correctly. However, there are a few challenges that are more harmful than fun. One that is popping up right now is called the Momo Challenge. There are not any viral videos of anyone participating in Momo, merely a terrifying image attached to other news articles warning parents.

So, what is the “Momo Challenge?” I think it’s important to start by saying that the challenge has been labeled as a hoax. Several investigators have said there is no real threat with Momo, but the problem goes deeper than the scary image we are seeing. The legend with Momo is that it is a game found on WhatsApp. Basically, kids would message this “person” and then Momo would give them instructions for self harm that eventually lead to suicide in several noted cases. That is one way Momo works.

In recent weeks, Momo has been appearing in children’s videos on YouTube. For example, there is a Peppa Pig video that cuts away from the original content and presents the viewer with the terrifying image of Momo, a stringy haired brunette with a long face and tennis ball size eyes, giving the viewer detailed instructions to harm themselves. Reader caution: I would not advise that anyone look for these videos. They can be incredibly triggering for viewers of all ages. I only watched one video for the purpose of this article, and I could not make it through the second.

Though it has been labeled a hoax, the idea behind this challenge is very similar to that of the “Blue Whale Challenge,” which rose to fame primarily around in 2015 and 2016 and was found to be popular in Ukraine, Russia, and right here in the United States. The people who ran the game would seek out sad, lonely-looking kids online and invite them to play. Similar to the concept of 2016’s film, *Nerve*, these kids would receive dares that would grow more and more sinister. It would begin with something along the lines like, “Stay up later than bedtime,” and it would end with the player being told to commit suicide. The challenge was set at fifty challenges for a fifty day timeframe. However, this has also been theorized as a legend created by people, much like Momo.

Now we have Momo— a creation whose image began as just a piece of art. Because of its use in the horrendous challenge, the artist destroyed the piece and alerted the world that Momo was officially “dead.” If only its image could be permanently erased that easily.

I personally am not certain about whether or not these challenges are real. I have seen the videos, but as the old saying goes, just because you read about it online, doesn’t make it true. Despite this, I do believe it suggests a new danger and form of exploitation on the internet. Maybe these challenges were not real, but even so, the power of the internet is in fact growing. It is plausible that the next big serial killer will use this form of communication and manipulation to collect their victims.

That being said, I think right now is a crucial time to be teaching children even more internet safety, as well as exercising more cautious behavior ourselves. Several parents have blocked their children from using YouTube. A few Youtubers have even requested children stay off YouTube for a while. I think it is important for parents, siblings, teachers, and even babysitters to be aware of what the children in their lives are doing.

If your young, impressionable sister, child, or nanny kid wants to watch a video, watch it with them just to make sure she is not being manipulated. Have a conversation about its content afterward and in general, discuss the power of media. There is no age too young to do so. A little involvement can go a long way. Lastly, if you do come across Momo in any videos, or anything else of its nature in the future, report that video immediately. Nothing can disappear forever, not anymore, but it can be buried deep— hopefully, never to return. †

## A Blindfolded Justice System

BY VICTORIA TURCIOS

**D**O YOU KNOW WHAT THE LADY JUSTICE statue looks like? The icon for our courts and judicial system, the personification of morality, wears a blindfold while holding a balance and a sword. That blindfold is meant to represent impartiality, which is the goal for the ideal justice system that is meant to disregard wealth, power, or any other kind of status. The latest news of Manafort’s sentencing raises questions about this impartiality and other disparities that are rampant in the current criminal justice system when it comes to race and class.

While discussing Paul Manafort’s seven and a half year sentencing, *MSNBC* compared his sentencing to the twenty-eight years prison sentence of former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick for corruption and financial crimes. They tapped into a government analysis made by the *Detroit Metro Times* which stated that, “prison sentences between 2012 and 2016 found black male offenders received sentences that were on average nearly twenty percent longer than similarly situated white men.” Keep in mind that Paul Manafort’s federal crimes, included tax evasion, lying to the government, and aiding a foreign power in stealing and being involved in an American election. Seven-and-a-half years went against sentencing guidelines which called for about 20 years on Manafort’s case.

Public outrage was strong after Manafort’s sentencing regarding his white-collar crimes. *The Guardian*, a British publication for international news, found through criminological research that, “white-collar defendants are likely to fare well compared to lower status offenders.” What considers someone to be white-collar? According to the *Business Dictionary*, it refers to anyone with a higher rank profession that requires no manual labor, is non-routine and a knowledge extensive job. Manafort’s sentencing show a sad truth in the research that both *MSNBC* and *The Guardian* found, resulting in wealth and status playing a role in sentencing despite severity of crimes in a judicial system that would sentence someone for possessing marijuana with ten years in prison, a much lesser crime than the lengthy list that Manafort is guilty of.

At the same time that Manafort was sentenced, another case widely covered was a massive college cheating scandal where at least fifty people have already been charged. Colleges named in the scandal included Yale, USC, UCLA, Stanford, and Georgetown amongst others. The parents involved included successful investors, actresses, a fashion designer, and even a chairman of a law-firm. Fake records and photoshopped photos for students to appear as athletes, to bribery for college admission reaching six figures per student were involved. The students resulted in getting admitted to these colleges not by their merit but through a fraud approach. The perplexing inequality culture being displayed from the judicial system to our college admissions is now in full display. The real question is, how will we go the extra mile to start holding these systems accountable? †

